The Merchant of Venice – Shylock

by Phillip W. Weiss

The Merchant of Venice **is more than just a provocative story about ethnic conflict and religious bigotry. It is about a man named Shylock who lets his emotions get the best of him, with tragic results. His monumental failure caused by his personal faults as a man, which cost him a great victory and set the stage for his ignominious defeat, is a stark reminder of the essential powerlessness of the individual in the face of societal forces that can easily crush the individual. That Shylock is a Jew and is repeatedly maligned because of his Jewishness makes it easy to ascribe his collapse to anti-Semitism, yet this play is neither an attack against Shylock nor against Jews *per se* nor an endorsement of anti-Semitism as a rational philosophy, but rather it is a statement on the nature of society and the self-destructive urges within us.**

What was Shakespeare's attitude toward Jews? This question is of critical importance in determining how to interpret the play. If Shakespeare's purpose was to castigate Jews, then it would have been enough to portray Shylock as a caricature of an evil, nasty man utterly lacking in any redeeming social qualities or a life worthy of serious consideration. The story would be short: Jews are bad, therefore Shylock is bad, therefore Shylock suffers; the point is made and the case is closed. Yet the play is far more complex. From a reading of the text, certain preliminary conclusions can be drawn regarding Shakespeare's understanding of the nature of Christian-Jewish relations.

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First, Shakespeare knew that Jews existed, as evidenced by the character Shylock; second, he understood that Jews were involved in commercial activities outside of the Jewish community and that Christians sought the services of Jews, as evidenced by the Antonio - Shylock dealings; and third, he knew that Jews and Christians interacted socially, and even intermarried, as evidenced by the Jessica-Lorenzo relationship. Thus, Shakespeare appreciated that Jews were not completely marginalized, had a significant role in society and as such were at least tolerated, if not accepted. This is evident in Act 1, Scene 3, when Bassanio and Antonio meet with Shylock to arrange for the loan. Despite Antonio's harsh remarks directed at Shylock ("The devil can cite scripture for his purpose/An evil soul producing holy witness/Is like a villain with a smiling cheek/A goodly apple rotten at the heart/O what a goodly outside falsehood hath!" [I, 3, 96-100]), evidence of his unmitigated hostility, the fact that two men, Antonio and Salerio, Christian men and men of standing in their community, knew where to find this "villain" and were desirous of doing business with him attests that Shylock was considered a part of the larger community and, although hated, was not completely shunned.

Yet vilification of Shylock does not mean that the character himself is inherently bad. Shylock being called a "devil" by Antonio (I, 3, 95) or an "inexcerable dog" by Gratiano (IV, 1, 130) does not make it true. The English actor, Henry Irving, portrayed Shylock not as a villain but as someone "picturesque" and who responded to hatred "with an affection of deep humility." (*The Saturday Review*, p. 117). Irving's depiction hardly describes

a character that is villainous. Elmer Edgar Stoll asserts in his *Shakespeare Studies* that "Shylock is given the villain's due" (Stoll, page 121), yet concedes that some will have it "that Shylock is a noble spirit brought to shame." (Stoll, p. 129) There is no question that Jews were targets of hatred and scorn, as is Shylock, but that is not the issue here. Rather, the issue is whether Shylock is a villain and the answer to that question is a resounding NO! Nowhere in the play is Shylock accused of doing anything illegal; he breaks no laws; he is not a charlatan, a drifter, a trespasser or a thief. He is a businessman conducting his trade in the open, including with those who openly espouse their hatred of him. And despite the abuse directed at him, Shylock still entertains the possibility of being friends. In Act 1, Scene 3, Antonio tells Shylock: "If thou will lend this money, lend it not as to thy friends ... But lend it rather to thine enemy,/Who if he break, thou mayst with better face/Exact a penalty" to which Shylock replies: "Why look you, how you storm!/I would be friends with you and have your love ...." (I, 3, 128-134; 135-136). It is Antonio who spurns Shylock, and it is Antonio who vents hatred against a man who expresses a desire to be friends. Shylock is the epitome of dignity, which is how Irving played him on the stage. "The point ... was that his Shylock was intended to be, before all things, dignified ...." (*The Saturday Review*, p. 117). The same cannot be said of the mean-spirited Antonio or his cohorts.

Even Shylock's servant, Launcelot, understands that Shylock is no criminal. Three times he refers to Shylock as the devil, yet Launcelot knows

that by leaving Shylock he is doing wrong. In Act 2, Scene 2 Launcelot says: "To be ruled by my conscience, I should stay with the Jew my master who (God bless the mark) is a kind of devil; and to run away from the Jew I should be ruled by the fiend who, saving your reverence, is the devil himself." (II, 2, 18-22) Clearly the question of Launcelot's leaving has nothing to do with Shylock's personality; rather it is Launcelot's weakness of character that is driving him to do that which he himself attributes to the devil, and not to Shylock. Again, Shylock is innocent. Stoll writes that Shakespeare is at pains to label Shylock a villain (Stoll, p. 122), yet nowhere does Shakespeare interject himself as a character in this play. Shakespeare says nothing. He is the playwright and in that capacity puts words in the mouths of other characters in order to tell a story and does this through the medium of drama. It is Antonio and Bassanio who label Shylock a villain (I, 3, 98; 179), not Shakespeare. Of course, one might say that these characters are surrogates for Shakespeare and that Shakespeare is speaking through them. Yet even that is mere speculation and alone is insufficient grounds from which to draw inferences. If someone writes a play about the Holocaust and the play has a scene in which a Nazi is abusing a Jew, does that necessarily mean the playwright is an anti-Semite? Of course it does not. Unless there is unimpeachable documentary evidence conclusively showing that Shakespeare harbored anti-Semitic feelings, the question of Shakespeare's attitude toward Jews is a matter for speculation. Trying to interpret Shakespeare's private attitudes and

intentions through his public writings, which were meant to entertain, is an exercise in futility. One would have had to ask Shakespeare why he wrote the play.

If Shakespeare's attitude toward the Jews is a matter for conjecture, Shylock's attitude toward himself and his situation are plainly apparent. He is indignant; he views himself as a victim of religious intolerance and as someone who has been unjustly treated, as evidenced in the text. In Act 1, Scene 3, Shylock says: "I hate him [Antonio] because he is a Christian" (I, 3, 36), a harsh commentary that suggests a malevolent personality. But then Shylock goes on to explain why he hates Antonio: "He hates our sacred nation, and he rails/Even there where merchants most do congregate,/On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift/Which he calls interest." (I, 3, 42-45). Antonio is unmoved and replies with a threat: "I am like to call thee so again,/To spet on thee again, to spurn thee too." (I, 3, 127-128). These are fighting words. Under these circumstances, Shylock's hatred is understandable. He is being targeted for attack, publicly taunted and tormented, because of the way he earns his living and because he is a Jew. Antonio wants to drive Shylock out of business, motivated by pure hatred fueled by bigotry and envy, the latter because Shylock is a competitor, and moreover a successful competitor, who makes money legally while Antonio is struggling. And when Antonio becomes Shylock's customer, his humiliation and failure is obvious; all he has left is his hatred; he has nothing substantive to bring to the bargaining

table except empty pockets and foolish words. And when Shylock cites biblical text sanctioning the value of thrift ("And thrift is a blessing if men steal it not" [I, 3, 87]), meaning that careful management of wealth for profit is inherently good, Antonio's debasement is complete. Antonio, not Shylock, becomes the villain, the bad guy. Thus, when Stoll describes Shylock as a moneymaker and miser, a villain, a gross egoist and even an atheist (Stoll, p. 123), these inflammatory words ignore the fact that Shylock occupies the moral high ground. This does not mean that Shylock is a nice man or a friendly person. Rather, he is a victim and his behavior must be analyzed and interpreted within that context. And if Shylock is a moneymaker and a miser, then Antonio is a bigot and a fool who squanders wealth. Perhaps in a moment of levity, Henry Irving would have had Shylock teaching Antonio how to operate a business.

The text of the play contains no evidence that Shakespeare takes sides in the Antonio-Shylock conflict. He lets the story speak for itself. There is nothing in the play that seems unduly unfair, slanted or political. That is, the play is not a polemic; it is not advocating a certain position; and it is not targeting one particular character for excoriation (both Shylock and Antonio have reprehensible flaws and even Portia has a streak of deceitfulness in her). It is a work of fiction which employs literary devices to intensify the drama. Shylock and Antonio are in conflict; they clearly do not like each other; they go out of their way to try to intimidate, humiliate and injure one another; they conduct business in bad-faith, that is, with

hidden agendas; there is a trial; Shylock is ruined; Christianity triumphs ... or does it? In Act 4, Scene 1, Portia says that "Then the Jew must be merciful" (IV, 1, 186) and then explains why he must be merciful: "It is an attribute to God himself,/And earthly power doth then show likest God's/When mercy season's justice." (IV, 1, 199-201), yet the events at the trial underscore the hypocrisy of Portia's sanctimonious remarks as Shylock is shown no mercy and is stripped of everything he owns, including his religion. While Shylock held the upper hand, mercy was demanded, but the moment Shylock lost his grip, then all talk of mercy ceased and a double-standard is cruelly applied, denying Shylock the very mercy which he was expected to show to another. In Act 4, Scene 1, Portia asks Antonio: "What mercy can you render him, Antonio?" (IV, 1, 389) to which Antonio's associate, Gratiano, replies: "A halter gratis, nothing else for God's sake," (IV, 1, 390) meaning "let's hang Shylock, for free." That response can hardly be construed as a call for Christian charity. But Antonio lets Shylock live, albeit stripped of everything. Perhaps there were those in the audience who may have thought, "Good for the Jew, he got what he deserved," but some may have wondered, "Is that what God meant by mercy?"

On the reverse side of the coin, Shylock could arguably be described as villainous or at least a reprehensible character. He is overbearing, inflexible, and self-righteous. In Act 1, Scene 3, Shylock (referring to Antonio) says: "I hate him for he is a Christian"; in Act 2, Scene 5, he refers to

Christians as "fools with varnished faces"; and in Act 4, Scene 1, he tells the court: "… More than a lodged hate and certain loathing I bear Antonio …" (I, 3, 36; II, 5, 33; IV, 1, 61-62). These comments suggest a person infused with anger. He certainly does not exude a sense of warmth. Nevertheless, one can take this argument just so far because once Shylock's behavior is placed within the broader context of the story and setting, his hostility becomes more comprehensible and plausible. After all, the man from whom Shylock wants his pound of flesh spat on him out of pure spite, which makes it not unreasonable to expect that Shylock would harbor a deeply rooted grudge.

***Merchant* raises another question: Is Shylock afforded justice? Shylock is given his day in court; what he demands is the discharge of a legally binding contractual obligation and here his demand is just. Money, however, is not the issue. Shylock does not want Antonio's money; he wants to take Antonio's life, and herein lays Shylock's fatal flaw which transforms him into a tragic figure. Shylock knew that the law was on his side, yet he presses on with his demand for flesh, throwing caution to the winds, his actions guided by self-righteous indignation and anger as evidenced by his own words:**

> **If it [the pound of flesh] will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He has disgraced me and hind'red me a half a million., laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated my enemies, and what's his reason? I am a Jew. (III, 1, 44-48).**

Twisted by hate, Shylock is setting the stage for his own destruction.

Shylock is not seeking justice; he wants to use the court to gain revenge but in doing so he cannot win his case. Instead he only alienates the court, which immediately sees through Shylock's scheme. (IV, 1, 17-35). Moreover, unlike Antonio, Shylock has no one backing him up; he is isolated, lacks friends, is operating in a hostile environment, yet he pushes his case to the brink, and beyond. His recklessness is astounding. It is true that his demand is legally valid, but that alone does not guarantee justice, and in Shylock's case it is inevitable that justice will be denied, and not out of bias but because of Shylock's obstinacy; he does not get his pound of flesh and leaves the court a mere shadow of his former self, a Muselmann.[1]

What does Shylock's downfall mean for us, the audience? Why should we care about what happens to Shylock? We must care because like Shylock, we are members of society too, and *The Merchant of Venice* is a warning to all of us of what can happen when we let our emotions take hold of us. The results can be disastrous. That Shylock is a Jew is of secondary importance. Shylock's precipitous collapse is a spectacle that forces Jew and non-Jew alike to ask: "Am I opening up myself to the same treatment?" What happened to Shylock could happen to a non-Jew too. Ultimately, Antonio had to depend on Portia to bail him out and save his life and without her intercession the court would have convicted him, a Christian, and it would have been he and not Shylock who would leave the court bereft of everything, including his life, the earnest pleas for Christian charity notwithstanding. Antonio is told as much by the court when, referring to

[1] Muselmann – a psychological state characterized by a morbid apathy toward life. This word was applied to concentration camp inmates who had lost the will to live.

Portia, the Duke tells him: "Antonio, gratify this gentleman,/For in my mind you are much bound to him" (IV, 1, 419-420). This is why *The Merchant of Venice* is not about anti-Semitism; its message has a universal applicability that extends way beyond the confines of a sectarian conflict. Shylock is vanquished because of a character flaw that clouds his judgment and causes him to make poor choices, and in an unforgiving society that can be lethal.

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